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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by the International Federation of University Women, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The International Federation of University Women (IFUW), founded in 1919, is a non-governmental organization of graduate women with 180,000 members in 66 countries. Over the years, issues of health for women have been a key area of focus and research by our members. This is borne out by the number of health-related resolutions passed at IFUW conferences and the programmes initiated by national federations and associations related specifically to health matters. As pointed out recently by the Director of the World Health Organization (WHO), health is a human right, and women have specific rights in this context as the bearers of the next generation. Education and health are inseparably linked. According to the WHO Constitution, education is a prerequisite to health. It is vital to look at the need for continuing health education for women and girls throughout their lifespan.

Section C of the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, in 1995, is comprehensive. Much research has been done and data collected on many of the issues dealt with in the Declaration and Platform for Action. However, there seems to be an unwillingness to disseminate this in a gender- and age-disaggregated form and to make the results accessible to the broadest spectrum of the population. A prime

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concern of Governments should therefore be to put in place mechanisms and make funding available for the dissemination and coordination of research and data worldwide on women's health issues, as an integral part of any research programme. Non-governmental organizations should monitor this process.

In examining the strategic priorities in section C, five areas have been of particular concern to IFUW:

1. Reproductive health care: Governments should see this in its wider context of not only population control and family planning but also questions of maternal mortality and the need to develop practices for safe motherhood. This must be linked to nutritional factors and cultural practices, and more effort made to counteract the lack of health services. Governments should also ensure that teaching and training in reproductive health care includes information on immunization programmes for young children, and make funding available to carry out such programmes. Programmes should be initiated, and, where already in place, extended, to make women and men aware of the harmful effects of the abuse of substances such as alcohol, tobacco and drugs on the reproductive system. In this context, it is imperative that more research be undertaken into the cultural and ritual practices that help spread HIV/AIDS, and the research results disseminated.

2. Adolescent health in general is an area where preventive health care can produce huge benefits. Adolescent health care should not include only the issues of early marriage and teenage pregnancy but also substance abuse, lack of adequate nutrition in crucial stages of development, and the effects of child labour on health. Governments, non-governmental organizations and local communities should encourage the involvement of young and adolescent girls in the planning, development and implementation of programmes that have a direct effect on their health and well being. Governments and local communities should see that compulsory health education programmes are part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools, as part of a measure to increase preventive health care.

3. Genetic research: It is imperative that Governments implement laws and regulations and that non-governmental organizations monitor the research and development in this field so that there is effective control. Research on human fertilization and embryology has often been done without the necessary ethical norms in place. Governments and medical professions should include social as well as ethical issues in their application of advances in genetic knowledge, inform the public of current research and developments, and consider the cultural mores of the ethnic groups within their population in formulating any regulations. Legislation must also be drawn up and enacted to prohibit clones of the whole person.

4. Gender-specific research: Governments should provide funding for the development of research programmes as well as curricula and health care programmes which will provide training in the specific needs of women, not just in medical care but also on women's social and psychological attitudes to illness, to doctor/patient communication, and the relation between gender and drugs prescribed, where insufficient attention has often been paid to hormonal and physiological differences. In general, it is important to identify more definitively health conditions that are gender-different.

5. Health care work: Women predominate in paid and unpaid health care work. The reorganization of health care services being undertaken in many countries should include: analysis of the debilitating effects of caregiving, especially on voluntary workers; the social costs in terms of the often resultant long-term consequences of strain; and measures adopted to prevent them.

In conclusion, coordinated efforts are still needed by United Nations agencies, Governments, educational and health care institutions and non-governmental organizations to ensure that research, health education and delivery of health care programmes benefit women and girls on a global scale.